Nosce Te Ipsum:
The Senses of Self-Knowledge in Early Modern England

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I. Scepticism and Self-Knowledge

> We are difficult. Human beings are difficult. We're difficult to ourselves, we're difficult to each other. And we are mysteries to ourselves, we are mysteries to each other. One encounters in any ordinary day far more real difficulty than one confronts in the most "intellectual" piece of work. Why is it believed that poetry, prose, painting, music should be less than we are?[2]

With these words, part of an interview published in the *Paris Review* in 2000, Geoffrey Hill responds to the interviewer's comment that his poetry is often thought to be inaccessible by presenting this abstruseness as a natural and appropriate response to the challenges of understanding humanity itself. In particular, Hill touches on two themes which, this essay argues, were of profound concern to writers and theologians in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries: the opacity of the self to the self, and the capacity of poetics to explore this mystery.

In the Western world, philosophy has long been conceived of as a discipline of self-knowledge, and the Socratic, ethical, and spiritual imperative to 'know thyself' was frequently reiterated in the early modern period. Nonetheless, thinkers from across the confessional spectrum frequently emphasized the difficulties (and sometimes even the impossibility) of achieving self-knowledge. 'Thou art to narrow, wretch', Donne informs his soul in *The Second Anniversary* (1612), 'to comprehend / Euen thy self'.[3] This notion that self-knowledge is – counter-intuitively – the most difficult form of knowledge owed something to two related phenomena which emerged around the middle of the sixteenth century: the development of the anthropological assumptions of Reformed theology, and the revival of classical scepticism. Montaigne's long essay 'An Apologie of Raymond Sebond', first published in the 1580 edition of his *Essays*, and translated into English by John Florio in 1603, is seminal here.[4] An

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[2] 'The Art of Poetry LXXX: Geoffrey Hill', an interview with Carl Phillips, p. 275.

[3] Donne, 'The Second Anniuersarie', G1r.

[4] On Montaigne's transformation of 'the Socratic tradition of philosophy as self-knowledge', see Ann Hartle, 'The Essay as Self-Knowledge', pp. 63-83.

influential strand in Montaigne criticism suggests that, for Montaigne, self-knowledge is the last bastion of certainty. For Erich Auerbach, the *Essays* 'reveal Montaigne's conviction that no branch of learning and no form of knowledge could possibly be acquired with as much exactness and comprehensiveness as self-knowledge'.[5] And indeed, at points in the *Essays*, Montaigne does make claims about the special status of the self as an object of knowledge. In 'Of Repenting', for example, Montaigne writes of himself that 'never man handled subject, he vnderstood or knew, better then I doe this I have vndertaken'.[6]

Elsewhere, however, Montaigne is considerably less confident about the attainability of self-knowledge.[7] In the 'Apologie', self-knowledge poses a particular challenge precisely because of what might initially seem to be an epistemic advantage: that is, the proximity of the self *to* the self. 'Our condition beareth', Montaigne suggests, 'that the knowledge of what we touch with our hands, and have amongst vs, is as far from vs and above the clouds, as that of the stars' – and the self is no exception. Querying the arrogance of Sebond's detractors, Montaigne asks: 'Did they never sound amid their books the difficulties that present themselves to them, to know their owne being?'[8] 'It is likely', he elaborates, 'that if the soule knew any thing, she first knew her selfe'. And yet:

> Even at this day the Gods of Physicke are seene to wrangle about our Anatomie… When shall we expect that they will be agreed? We are neerer vnto our selves, then is whitenesse vnto snow, or weight vnto a stone. *If man know not himselfe, how can he know his functions and forces?*[9]

This passage requires some explanation: Montaigne's comment about the whiteness of snow recalls an earlier reference to the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras, who had argued, counter-intuitively, that snow is not white but black – a piece of sophistry that Pyrrhonian sceptics took to indicate the controvertibility of all knowledge.[10] On the other hand, academic sceptics (who took doubt as a heuristic tool for uncovering probabilistic, if not certain, knowledge) found this risible: for them, we can be reasonably sure about proximate phenomena such as the whiteness of snow, or the weight of

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[5] Auerbach, 'L'Humaine Condition', p. 301.
[6] Michel de Montaigne, 'Of Repenting', Ss4r.
[7] As Luiz Eva argues, pace Auerbach, 'instead of helping to achieve knowledge of the self, [Montaigne's essays] should be taken… as exhibiting how he *fails to gain self-knowledge*': 'Scepticism and Self-Knowledge', p. 73.
[8] Montaigne, 'An Apologie of Raymond Sebond', Dd1v.
[9] Montaigne, 'Apologie', Ee2r-v.
[10] See Cicero, *Academica*, trans. Rackham, II.XXIII.72 and II.XXXI.100-101. Montaigne writes, 'humane reason hath perswaded, that she had neither ground nor footing, no not so much as to warrant snow to be white: And *Anaxagoras* said, it was blacke'. 'Apologie', Cc3v.

a stone which we toss in our hand. It is Montaigne's sense of the limits of self-knowledge that leads him to affirm 'the Pyrrhonians advise' as 'more likely'.[11] Indeed, it is *precisely* our closeness to our own selves that makes self-knowledge so challenging to achieve. Florio's translation preserves the ambiguity of Montaigne's original French nicely: 'we are neerer vnto our selves, then is whitenesse vnto snow, or weight vnto a stone' ('*nous nous sommes plus voisins, que ne nous est la blancheur de la neige, ou la pesanteur de la pierre*').[12] Montaigne's most widely-consulted modern translators, M. A. Screech and Donald Frame, both take Montaigne to mean, as Frame puts it, that 'we are nearer to ourselves than the whiteness of snow or the weight of stone are to us'.[13] For Florio, however, we are closer to ourselves than whiteness is close to snow, or weight is close to stones. There is a gap, however negligible, between the sensory properties of an object, and the essence of the object: snow is not its whiteness, and a stone is not its weight. But we *are* ourselves. It is for this reason that self-knowledge is impossible: we cannot grasp what we are.

II. Augustine and Reformed Theology

The sceptical uncertainty about self-knowledge is echoed in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed theology. Here, the stakes are high: self-knowledge was considered a religious obligation. Although the command *nosce te ipsum*, which was inscribed on the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, had pagan associations, its ultimate origins were often conceived as heavenly: in the words of Thomas Elyot in *The boke named the Gouernour* (1537), 'were it Apollo, that spake it […] suerly it proceded of god'.[14] Indeed, for many the quest for self-knowledge was coterminous with the quest *for* God. Here the influence of St Augustine was considerable. In the *Confessions*, alienation from the self (engendered by sin) is indistinguishable from alienation from God. 'Where was I', Augustine asks God, regarding his pre-conversion self, 'when I sought after thee? Thou wert directly before mee, but I had gone backe from thee; nor did I then finde my selfe, much lesse thee'. Augustine frequently expresses bewilderment about his own nature, thoughts, and impulses, even going so far as to qualify scripture

[11] Although there may be an intentional irony in Montaigne's use of probabilistic language ('more likely') to undercut Academic probabilism.
[12] Montaigne, *Les Essais*, p. 561.
[13] Montaigne, 'Apologie', *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Frame, p. 421. The translations by Frame and Screech are both based on the Bordeaux copy of the *Essais*, whereas Florio used the 1595 edition by Marie de Gournay. See Mack, 'Montaigne and Florio', pp. 78-79.
[14] Elyot, *The boke named the Gouernour*, X2r (164). On the oracle's pagan and diabolical associations, see Parke and Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle*, 389, and Ossa-Richardson, *The Devil's Tabernacle*.

in order to make his point. Citing 1 Corinthians 2:11 ('no man knows the being of man except the spirit of man which is in him'), he adds 'Yet is there some thing of man, which the very spirit of man that is in him, knoweth not'. Subsequently, conversion is simultaneously an entry into a more perfect relationship with the divine, and the dawning of deeper self-understanding: 'now was the day come', writes Augustine, anticipating his imminent conversion experience in Book VIII, 'wherein I was to bee set naked before my selfe'.[15]

Reformers reiterate and develop the links that Augustine establishes between the search for self-knowledge and the search for God. As John Calvin writes in the first chapter of *The Institution of Christian Religion*, translated by Thomas Norton in 1561:

> The whole summe… of all our wisedom… consisteth in two partes, that is to saye, the knowledge of God, and our selues… these two knowledges be with many brades linked together: yet whether goth before or engendreth the other, it is hard to discerne.

For Calvin, self-knowledge and knowledge of God are isomorphic. On the one hand, by looking into ourselves and recognizing what Calvin describes as 'our own ignoraunce, vanitie, beggery, weakenesse, peruersenesse, and corruption', we come by comparison to appreciate the absolute purity and goodness of God.[16] On the other hand, it is only through encountering the purity and goodness of God that we fully apprehend the extent of our own depravity.

The urgent importance of self-knowledge for the devout, however, was balanced by a pervasive awareness of its challenges. Ironically, for many it is the Augustinian-cum-Calvinist conviction of humankind's innate corruption and baseness – the primary focus *of* self-knowledge – that makes self-knowledge so difficult to achieve. Thus, for Donne, lack of self-understanding derives from a shame so profound that men hide from themselves. 'The light of nature', Donne informs his congregation in a 1621 sermon, 'hath taught thee to *hide thy sinnes* from other men, and thou hast been so diligent in that, as that thou hast hid them from thy self, and canst not finde them'.[17] On the Catholic continent, this notion was shared with the French Jansenists, who were committed to a 'hyper-

[15] Augustine, *Confessions*, Book V, K10r (211); Book X, Cc2r-v; and Book VIII, V12v.
[16] Calvin, *The Institution*, A1r (fol. 1).
[17] Donne, 'A Sermon Preached At the Earl of Bridgewaters house at the mariage of his daughter [1627]', in *Fifty sermons*, Ff1v.

Augustinian' anthropology and theology of grace.[18] 'Man without Grace', as Pierre Nicole wrote in his *Essais de morale* (1671; trans. 1680), 'is so great a punishment to himself, that he inclines continually to fly from himself… and that he thinks his happiness consists in being forgetful of himself'.[19]

The theological acknowledgement of the challenges of self-knowledge, however, was also influenced by the revived interest in classical scepticism. Many Jansenists actively sympathized with Pyrrhonist authors, and Reformed thinkers, too, were far from immune to the provocations of sceptical philosophy: several echoed Montaigne in suggesting that an individual's self-intimacy is a barrier to self-knowledge.[20] In bringing skeptical thought to bear on their theological preoccupations, such thinkers confronted and grappled with some inherent ambiguities in Augustinian thought for ends which were pastoral and practical, as well as polemical.

Whilst Augustine of the *Confessions* describes his personal quest for self-knowledge as protracted and arduous, his most explicit and systematized comments on self-knowledge occur in *On the Trinity*, where we find a very different story.[21] In this later tract, Augustine subscribes to a version of what would later be referred to by philosophers as 'the doctrine of privileged access', namely, the notion that an individual's introspective judgements about his or her mental states are not subject to error in the same way as judgments about external things.[22] Augustine starts from the principle that it is the nature of the mind to know things. As an entity which is defined by its capacity to know, the mind must necessary know itself, for 'what is so present to knowledge as that which is present to the mind? Or what is so present to the mind as itself?' Even the desire to know one's own mind is evidence that the mind already knows itself: 'when it seeks to know itself, it already knows that it is seeking itself. Therefore, it already knows itself'. Consequently, for Augustine 'every mind knows and is certain concerning itself'.[23]

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[18] Jansenist thinking on this subject is treated by Michael Moriarty in *Fallen Nature, Fallen Selves* (see especially pp. 305-315). Moriarty also explores suspicion of the transparency of experience (including self-experience) in his earlier *Early Modern French Thought*. On 'hyper-Augustinianism' – a radical interpretation of grace as a necessary obliteration of the depraved human will – see Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, especially pp. 246-47, 332-34.

[19] Nicole, *Moral Essays*, B2v.

[20] On the connections between scepticism and Jansenism, see Lennon, 'Jansenism and the *Crise Pyrrhonienne*'.

[21] For a cogent account of self-knowledge in *On the Trinity*, see Brittain, 'Self-Knowledge in Cicero and Augustine', 119-136.

[22] On the doctrine of privileged access, see Cassam, 'Contemporary Reactions', p. 483. See also Matthews, 'Introduction', p. xxv.

[23] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, pp. 48-55.

Crucially, one of the main ways in which Augustine explains this principle is by referring to, and ultimately rejecting, an analogy that originated with the neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyry: namely, the suggestion that our inability to know ourselves is like the inability of the eye to see itself.[24] Augustine denies this analogy in favour of an emphasis on the feasibility and ease of self-knowledge, and on the incorporeity of the soul:

> Not as the eye of the body sees other eyes and does not see itself, so does the mind know other minds and does not know itself. […] For eyes will never see themselves except in a mirror; nor are we to believe in any way that such means may also be used for the contemplation of incorporeal things, as that the mind should know itself as it were in a mirror.[25]

For Augustine, it is the corporeality of the eye which prevents it from perceiving itself, except by means of the material, indirect aid of a mirror. Such a mode of knowledge is not appropriate for the incorporeal soul, which (as Augustine has already demonstrated to his own satisfaction) is possessed of an immediate and assured form of self-knowledge. It is remarkable, then, that when early modern theologians and authors invoke the eye analogy – as they frequently do – it is levied in support of exactly the sceptical argument that Augustine denies: that the soul is ultimately inscrutable to itself, and that access to it must be mediated and incomplete. In the words of the nonconformist minister and physician Richard Gilpin in *A treatise of Satan's temptations* (1677), 'some things are dark and uncertain to us, from their very *proximity* to us […] such are the nature, faculties, and workings of our own Souls within us: which we cannot *directly* see, (as the Eyes sees not it self) and do but as it were guess by dark *reflections'*.[26]

As Richard Popkin and others have suggested, the revival of classical scepticism combined with Reformation and counter-Reformation thought to unsettle long-standing certainties.[27] Late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century practical theologians, however, also made use of sceptical philosophy – including the notion of the unknowable self – not to disturb or disrupt accepted dogmas,

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[24] See Porphyre [Porphyry], *Sentences*, nos. 43, 830-32. The analogy was elaborated by Cicero before it was adopted by Augustine: 'the soul has not the power of itself to see itself, but, like the eye, the soul, though it does not see itself, yet discerns other things.' Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, p. 79.
[25] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, pp. 27, 47.
[26] Gilpin, *Demonologia sacra*, Dd3v. For an earlier iteration, see Phillipe de Mornay: 'notwithstanding how lyuely and quickesighted so euer the eye be; it séeth not it self. Woonder not therefore though thou haue a soule […] that the same soule sée not it self'. Mornay, *The trewnesse of the Christian religion,* Q4v.
[27] Popkin, *History of Scepticism.*

but rather to offer practical, pastoral guidance and support. There is a broad scholarly consensus that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination encouraged intense self-scrutiny, as believers examined themselves and their lives for signs of election and grace. For some, such self-scrutiny resulted in a complacent (and therefore dangerous) sense of 'security' about their own salvation.[28] Others found themselves wanting, producing intense anxiety and desolation. Working within this framework, Reformed theologians make use of the suggestion that full self-knowledge is a futile aspiration both to obviate the conviction of the over-confident of their own salvation, and to palliate anxieties in those who feared their own lack of grace.

The moderate Puritan Richard Greenham, writing in a 1595 treatise intended to offer 'sweet Comfort for an afflicted Conscience', is a case in point. In offering reassurance to those distressed by their own sinful natures, Greenham observes that their distress is itself a form of humility, and as such one sign of salvation. Conversely, the truly degenerate tend to take their own virtuous actions as a sure sign of election. Such complacency, Greenham warns, is misguided, for 'the hidden corruption of our nature, may threaten some haynous downefall in time to come'. This is because we cannot know our future selves: 'though we may remember what we have been […] yet who can tell what may come unto him hereafter'.[29] Greenham encourages early modern men and women to see their own selves as enigmas, full of moral and spiritual peril; and for those who already recognize themselves as such, he offers reassurance that this need not indicate a lack of grace. Richard Hooker also makes use of the notion of humankind's self-ignorance in order to alleviate the fear and despair with which many responded to Calvinist predestination. As he contends in his 1612 sermon 'of the certaintie and perpetuitie of faith in the elect', an over-scrupulous anxiety about whether or not one is saved can obscure the evidence of blessedness in oneself:

> Men […] are through extremitie of griefe many times in judgement so confounded, that they finde not themselves in themselves. For that which dwelleth in their harts they seeke […]. It abideth, it worketh in them, yet still they aske where? Still they lament… as if they did not believe when they do; & as if they did dispaire when they do not. […] Our faith may have and hath her privie operations secret to us, in whom […] they are.[30]

[28] Susan Schreiner takes what she calls 'the passion for certainty' as a central stimulus of religious controversy in the sixteenth century, perhaps underestimating the extent to which reformers and counter-reformers alike were prepared to accommodate doubt and uncertainty: *Are You Alone Wise?*, especially chapter 2. On the pejorative associations of 'securitas' for Luther, see Giles Waller's chapter in this volume.
[29] Greenham, *A most sweete and assured comfort*, D8v and D11r-v.
[30] Hooker, *A learned and comfortable sermon*, B1r, B2r.

For Hooker, it is possible to be so caught up in a fretful search for signs of one's election that one can be saved and yet not realise it, precisely because one is distracted by that search. Here, the opacity of the self is a bulwark against the sin of despair, for if you can never be absolutely certain that you are saved, so too can you never be absolutely certain that you are damned. For both Greenham and Hooker, in different ways, a sceptical idea serves not to unsettle religious certainties, but to serve the practical, pastoral ends of Reformed theology, whether by encouraging vigilance or offering comfort.

III. Body and soul

So far in this essay, I have been primarily taking self-knowledge as a moral and spiritual quest. For Augustine, the feasibility of self-knowledge depends on understanding the self as coterminous with the mind or soul. In this, he concurs with a number of ancient authorities, including Cicero in *Tusculan Disputations*. 'I do not suppose', Cicero comments, 'the meaning of the maxim is that we should know our limbs, our height or shape; our selves are not bodies […]. When then Apollo says, "Know thyself," he says, "Know thy soul."'[31] As Angus Gowland has recently argued, the mind-body dualism of Cicero and Augustine endured well into the seventeenth century: for early modern men and women, Gowland contends, 'the "true", "inner" self of the individual human being was the rational soul'. [32] This claim, however, goes against the grain of the dominant model of subjectivity within early modern studies in recent decades, according to which there was, in Gail Kern Paster's words, 'no way conceptually or discursively to separate the psychological from the physiological'.[33] Drawing on Galenic medical theory, scholars such as Paster have insisted that early modern selves were fundamentally embodied.

In fact, the question of whether the self should be understood primarily as a spiritual or as a physical entity was a live issue in the early modern period itself. Although writers in the Reformed tradition, including Greenham and Hooker, clearly associated self-knowledge with knowledge of one's spiritual state, they also described processes of soul-searching in intensely visceral terms.[34] Greenham, for example, calls the guilty conscience a 'wound' which must be 'prick[ed] and 'pierce[d]' by 'the burning iron of the Law'.[35] Similarly, for the physician and anatomist Helkiah Crooke – who edited

[31] Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 62-3.
[32] Gowland, 'Melancholy, Passions, and Identity', 86.
[33] Paster, *Humouring the Body*, 12. In addition to Gowland, other recent critiques of humoural psychology include Mullaney, *The Reformation of the Emotions*, pp. 54-60, and Meek and Sullivan, 'Introduction'.
[34] On embodied self-scrutiny, see Sawday, 'Self and Selfhood'.
[35] Greenham, *A most sweete and assured comfort*, D2v.

Greenham's treatise in 1598 – anatomical expertise offered one route to self-knowledge, allowing some of the spiritual anguish and uncertainty identified by Greenham to be overcome.[36] 'Anatomy', Crooke proclaims in his *Mikrokosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man* (1615), 'is […] a most certaine and sure guide to the admirable and most excellent knowledge of our selves'.[37]

Early modern authors, then, frequently describe the pursuit of self-knowledge in corporeal terms: the body is not a barrier to self-understanding, as it was for Augustine, but a route to it. This emphasis on embodiment, however, is not necessarily incompatible with a dualistic notion of the self as primarily spiritual. Early modern selves *were* deeply embodied, but we need to cast the net wider in order to understand what embodiment meant in this period, and how it was imbricated with spiritual and mental processes. In particular, the polarization of recent debate around two supposedly mutually-exclusive models of selfhood – physical versus spiritual – derives from the critical obsession with the pneumatic and hydraulic model of embodiment offered by Galenic medicine. This has obscured an alternative early modern understanding of embodiment in terms of sensation. In this rather different interpretation, the embodied self is constituted through sensory processes which bridge the gap between the physical, and the mental or spiritual realms.[38] Consequently, self-knowledge is predicated on reflexive, sensory self-attentiveness. Thus, in *Of Wisdom* (trans. 1608), Pierre Charron advises his readers that:

> The knowledge of a mans selfe is [acquired] […] by a true, long, and daily study of himselfe […] of his most secret thoughts […] and whatsoeuer is in him, euen his nightly dreames, prying narrowly into him, trying him often and at all howres, pressing and pinching him euen to the quicke […] taking him in all senses, beholding him with all visages, feeling his poulse, sounding him to to the quicke, entring into him with a candle and a snuffer, searching and creeping into euery hole, corner, turning, closet, and secret place.[39]

Here, the attempt to achieve self-knowledge is intensely sensory, a matter of 'beholding', 'feeling', and 'sounding'. As such, it is also profoundly embodied, revealing its secrets partly through medical-diagnostic procedures such as pulse-taking. This physical examination, however, does not exclude

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[36] Birken, 'Crooke, Helkiah', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
[37] Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia*, C1r-v. As David Hillman notes, 'Crooke's rhetoric […] conflates an objective knowledge of the human body with an understanding of subjective human nature': *Shakespeare's Entrails*, p. 34.
[38] As Lowell Gallagher and Shankar Raman suggest, embodiment might productively be treated as 'a constellation of different kinds of sensory and perceptual engagement with the world': 'Introduction', p. 3.
[39] Charron, *Of wisdom*, B3v.

investigation of more intangible 'secret thoughts' and 'nightly dreams': it is psychological as well as physiological, intellective as well as physical. For Charron and many of his contemporaries, self-knowledge is not a matter of attending to the ebb and flow of the humours, but rather of engaging the senses.

More specifically, the self was not only a sensory entity, but one which was often understood in terms of Aristotelian ideas about perception. Briefly, according to Aristotle and his scholastic commentators, there is nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses.[40] Sensation itself occurs when sensory 'species', incorporeal emanations from material things, imprint the form or image of the object of perception on the subject's sensory organs. As Aristotle puts it in *De Anima*, 'the sense is the recipient of the perceived forms without their matter'.[41] The sensory species or impressions are then transported by means of the 'vital' or 'animal spirits' from the sense organs to the brain, where an 'inner' sense known as the common sense worked to aggregate and reflect on the data received, synthesising it into a coherent perceptual whole.[42] From here, sense impressions could be stored in the memory, judged by reason, or recombined and recreated by the imagination or phantasy.

This notion that sensation occurs via a literal imprinting of the form or image of the object of perception on the subject's perceptual organs gave sense experience a key role in shaping the self, understood as a hylomorphic compound of form and matter, or body and soul. Sensation is described as a kind of alteration: the sensing individual is, at least in part, remade in the image of the world that he or she perceives. And because the process of sensing is also, in Aristotelian epistemology, a process of acquiring knowledge, knowing has a part to play in the formation of the self. As the devotional writer and Bishop of Norwich, Edward Reynolds, put it in *Meditations on the fall and rising of St Peter* (1677):

> All knowledg consists in mixture and union, whereby the understanding receiveth into it the image and similitude of the thing which it knows; which made the Philosopher [Aristotle] say, That the Soul in understanding a thing is made the very thing which it understands.[43]

[40] The phrase '*nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*' is actually of indeterminate origin, but was often attributed to Aristotle in the early modern period. See Cranefield, 'On the Origins of the Phrase'.
[41] Aristotle, *De Anima*, p. 187.
[42] For a cogent account of Aristotle's ideas about the common sense, see Roazen, *The Inner Touch*, p. 38.
[43] Reynolds, *Meditations*, E4v-E5r.

Sensory experience is thus a process of transformation. Sensing is not just something which an individual self *does*; it actively contributes to the formation of the self. Put another way, the accumulation of sensory information is also a process of in-*formation*, of being formed, moulded, shaped, or fashioned.[44] This moulding or shaping, moreover, traverses the boundary between body and spirit, as physical experience culminates in the transformation of the soul. The sensory language used to describe processes of self-knowledge, then, associates the self neither with the physical specificities of humoural complexion, nor with incorporeal spirit. Instead, the self emerges in a transaction between body and soul or mind, as the individual strives to gain understanding of the world through the senses.

IV. Sensory Metaphor and Literary Form

The remainder of this essay takes Sir John Davies' *Nosce Teipsum* – a fascinating and critically under-appreciated gallimaufry of neo-Platonic, Aristotelian, and patristic (especially Augustinian) doctrine, with debts to Montaigne – as a sustained and profound meditation on the ways in which poetic language can both explicate and evade the challenges of embodied self-knowledge.[45] In Davies' poem, physical metaphors and analogies are instrumental in cultivating a form of knowledge about the soul which is defined, paradoxically, by the *limits* of such knowledge – as with Greenham's insistence that uncertainty about one's salvation is a clear indication of the presence of grace. In the words of Pierre Nicole, 'it is […] one part of the Knowledge we may have of our selves, to comprehend that we do not know our selves with assurance, in what even appears most Essential'.[46] Acknowledging the inscrutability of the soul is therefore a form of knowledge about the soul (specifically, about its innate limitations). We have already seen hints of this in what I have called the eye analogy. When Gilpin compares the soul to the eye which 'sees not it self' because of its 'very *proximity* to us', and suggests that the only way to gain knowledge of the soul is through '*dark reflections*', he is using a sensory analogy to explain the unknowability of the soul, to make it comprehensible. In this way, the analogy *itself* functions as something like one of the 'dark reflections' by which it is possible to reach some kind of understanding of what we are. In asserting the unknowability of the soul, the eye analogy actually

[44] The etymon is the classical Latin *informare*: to give form to, shape, fashion, to describe, to form in the mind, to form an idea of, to mould. 'Information, n.' *OED Online*, accessed 15 July 2016. oed.com/view/Entry/95568.
[45] On the poem's indebtedness to Montaigne, see Nemser, '*Nosce Teipsum* and the Essais of Montaigne', 95-103.
[46] Nicole, *Moral essays*, F11v.

makes visible the limits of human self-knowledge: it functions as a means of expressing, and thereby knowing, our own ignorance.

Nosce Teipsum again explores the fertile tensions within Augustine's thinking on this subject. Davies affirms that knowledge of the soul is possible for human beings, yet he places a pronounced emphasis on its limitations.[47] Like Augustine, the knowledge that he is especially concerned to avow (against the recent revival of Epicurean atomism) is of the immateriality and immortality of the soul, which emphatically does not 'spring […] from the Bodies humors'.[48] Davies departs dramatically from Augustine, however, in the *method* that he uses to 'prove' both that knowledge of the soul is achievable, and that such knowledge ultimately consists of a recognition of the soul's incorporeity and immortality. In *On the Trinity*, Augustine instructs that 'When [the mind] is […] commanded to know itself, it should not seek itself as though it were to be withdrawn from itself, but it should rather withdraw what it has added to itself'.[49] Self-knowledge is a matter of stripping back the material accretions which have attached themselves to our conception of our own minds, in order to reveal the true knowledge which was there all along. For all the Platonic and Augustinian framework of his poem, Davies utterly disregards these directives. Instead, he makes heavy use of physical and sensory analogies and metaphors, both in order to cultivate self-knowledge and to articulate its limits.

Early on in the poem, Davies highlights the elusiveness of self-knowledge. 'All things without, which round about we see', Davies comments, 'we seeke to know […] but that whereby we reason, live, and be, / Within our selves, we strangers are thereto'. Asking why this is the case, Davies follows Augustine in trying out, and then rejecting, the eye analogy:

> Is it because the minde is like the eye […]
> Not seeing it selfe, when other things it sees?
>
> No doubtless, for the minde can backward cast
> Vpon her selfe, her vnderstanding light;
> But she is so corrupt, and so defac't,
> As her own image doth her selfe affright.

[47] Eric Langley similarly notes Davies' concern with the limits of self-knowledge, although he is more concerned with the ethics of self-knowledge than with its epistemology, and reads the poem as a conventional statement of the limitations which the flesh places on the body: *Narcissism and Suicide*, pp. 43-4, 49-50.
[48] Davies, *Nosce teipsum*, C3r.
[49] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, p. 53.

Reiterating Augustine's argument that the soul *can* achieve self-illumination, Davies explains the fact that people are nonetheless frequently deceived about themselves by reference to the Augustinian-Calvinist argument that we shy away from confronting our own depravity. The means which Davies offers for correcting this tendency, however, differs radically from that offered by Augustine:

> […] who so makes a mirror of his mind,
> And doth with patience view himselfe therein,
> His *Soules* eternitie shall clearly find,
> Though th'other beauties be defac't with sinne.[50]

Whilst *On the Trinity* strenuously denies that the immaterial mind can see itself as the physical eyes do, 'in a mirror', Davies suggests that the soul's immortality can be perceived in exactly this way. What, though, does it mean to make a mirror of one's mind? Whilst Davies does not elaborate, the implication is that *Nosce Teipsum* itself performs this reflective role: by picturing the soul, it offers it access to itself.[51] The Church of England clergyman William Sherlock's definition of self-knowledge of 1694 is helpful here: 'self-knowledge properly signifies to contemplate our own Natures in their Idea, to draw our own Image and Picture as like the Original as we can, and to view our selves in it'.[52] Sherlock suggests that the first stage of self-knowledge is self-representation. This is exactly what Davies' poem performs. Thus, in an invocation to God-as-Muse, the first glimmerings of self-understanding converge with the present-tense inception of the poem: 'O Light which mak'st the Light', Davies beseeches, 'Lighten my spirit with one cleere heavenly ray, / Which now to view it selfe doth first begin'. Soon after, he implies that his petition has been answered: 'now, me thinks, I do distinguish plaine/ Each subtill line of her [i.e. the soul's] immortall face'. In both cases, the deictic 'now' aligns the dawning of self-knowledge with the moment of writing. In an understated pun, the lines of the poem are conflated with the lines of the soul's face. Davies poeticizes the soul in order to discern it.

Nosce Teipsum, then, does not retrospectively depict its speaker's pursuit of self-knowledge; rather, the poem itself manifests and contributes to the cumulative development of that knowledge.[53]

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[50] Davies, *Nosce teipsum*, B2v, B3r, H4r.
[51] As Brian Cummings comments, 'art or literature [is] intrinsically reflexive… the very act of writing involves reflecting upon the self': *Mortal Thoughts*, p. 24.
[52] Sherlock, *A defence*, L3r.
[53] On the history of the idea that 'reading and writing can play a fundamental role in the individual's search for self-knowledge and wisdom', see Stock, 'The Self and Literary Experience'.

Significantly, this knowledge is predicated on a mode of self-estrangement effected through the use of forms of metaphor, analogy, and personification: Davies can only see the soul once he has externalized it in his poem. Whilst Davies rejects the eye analogy, then, his poetic method implicitly affirms the notion it describes: the need for a measure of detachment from ourselves, in order to understand ourselves. As Davies puts it, in order 'to judge herself', the soul 'must her selfe transcend / As greater Circles comprehend the lesse'. One means by which this transcendence can occur is metaphor – especially, and paradoxically, through metaphors which figure the soul as a material entity. At different points in *Nosce Teipsum*, the soul is variously styled as a spreading vine, a bright star, a housewife and mother busily employed in '*houshold things*', an industrious bee, '*Noahs* Doue', an abject prisoner, and an imperious queen.[54] All of these analogies are conventional enough, but the dense, sequential way that Davies amasses them, one after another, highlights their incompatibility – how can something be at once burgeoning vegetable matter and fixed celestial body, humble insect and haughty sovereign? – so that they simultaneously amplify and revise each other. Davies rewrites the immaterial soul, the centre of the self, as a series of entities, recognizable in themselves but collectively disorienting. Self-knowledge is predicated on a re-presenting of the soul to itself as something which can be seen because it is made extraordinary, untethered by metaphor from its own illusory over-familiarity.

In *Nosce Tepisum*, formal literary features such as metaphor and analogy, periphrasis, apostrophe, and prosopopoeia serve to make the soul strange to itself, facilitating a form of self-knowledge which simultaneously includes an inbuilt recognition of its own inadequacy. Thomas Browne's comments in *Religio Medici* (1642) on the most appropriate form of language for expressing religious mysteries are illuminating here:

> Where there is an obscurity too deep for our reason, 'tis good to set downe with a description, periphrasis, or adumbration; for by acquainting our reason how unable it is to display the visible and obvious effect of nature, it becomes more humble and submissive unto the subtleties of faith.[55]

For Browne, forms of language that we have come to think of as characterizing the 'literary' – description, periphrasis, and adumbration – represent a way of 'acquainting our reason' with the *inadequacy* of reason. The indirections of such language register the limits of human ability to

[54] Davies, *Nosce teipsum*, C1v, C2v-r, F4v-G1r, I1v-2r; C3v-4r.
[55] Browne, *Religio Medici,* A8v-B1r.

understand divine mysteries. In effect, complex or rhetorically elaborate language becomes a literary manifestation of the medieval *via negativa*, a way of describing the divine by describing what the divine is not (in the case of Davies: physical and material). For Davies, this kind of apophatic poetics provides a way to articulate the mysterious spark of divinity in the self.

V. Conclusion

For many men and women around the turn of the seventeenth century, the self – understood as a hylomorphic composite of body and mind, physical sensation and spiritual contemplation – was conceived of and experienced as inscrutable. This mysteriousness can be understood partly as a development of Calvinist anthropology: fearful of their spiritual fate, such men and women experienced their own souls as decimated by sin and oblivious to the seedlings of damnation or grace which kindled inside them. The elusiveness of the self, however, also had a philosophical and structural explanation, often articulated via the sensory analogy of the eye which cannot see itself. According to this strand of thought, the source of one's self-alienation is, paradoxically, self-intimacy. The resources of poetry, I have suggested, offered one way out this conundrum. One paradox demands another: if we are estranged from ourselves through overfamiliarity, then we must become unfamiliar to ourselves in order to know ourselves. For John Davies, poetry functioned in just this way. By representing the soul in physical terms, poetic language could serve as a *productive* form of self-estrangement that could ultimately inculcate self-knowledge. Like one of Gilpin's 'dark reflections', it was a shadowy and indirect means of encountering the enduring mystery that is the self.

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